

THE TRIANGLE MURDERS

Prologue

New York City

March 25, 1911

At twenty minutes to quitting time, Fiona stopped typing and let her hands fall still.

Something was wrong.

She smelled it first, a familiar odor, like she'd left the iron on a shirt too long. Then she saw it. Wispy ribbons of smoke coiling up into the room from a gap at the bottom of the door. Fiona could almost taste it now, foul and acrid, an insidious miasma curling around her feet, her legs.

She leaped up, rushed to the exit and threw the door wide. In the corridor, a screen of smoke shimmered like a gathering of ghosts in the hallway but no flames were visible. The floor felt warm. Hot. She tread on the balls of her feet toward the elevator. That's when she heard it. The sound of glass breaking. Not a tinkling like a whisper, but a painful splintering. Then a rumble shook the building. Fiona's heart thrashed crazily and for a moment that was all she could hear. She had to get out, down, all the way down to the street. Ten floors.

The next sounds she heard threatened to close off her lungs. Screams. Workers, her friends, mostly women, coming from the production floor below. Fiona raced to the exit door and down the stairs. At the ninth floor, she garnered enough courage to push open the door. A blast of heat and a horde of half-mad women assaulted her. Before she could turn and head further down, the door slammed behind her. And locked.

Belligerent flames rolled across the huge expanse of the factory floor, devouring the wood planks, thrusting deadly tentacles toward the ceiling. She couldn't fathom how quickly the blaze had spread. Yet before her radiated a living hell.

Through the conflagration she could see the windows on the Washington Place side. The glass in the frames seemed to ripple and undulate. One by one, they exploded into fragments.

Fiona spied her friend, Becca, sprinting to a second stairway door. She followed on her heels. This exit, too, was locked. Becca wrenched at it, shrieking. Fiona tried to drag her away, but her friend, like the door, wouldn't budge. Sparks from the blaze caught Fiona's dress and the wool began to smolder. She slapped at the hot embers and darted through the firestorm. Her scalp prickled in pain and she heard a crackling sound. She reached up. Her hair was on fire.

Suddenly Fiona found herself drenched. Someone had thrown a pail of water over her. She couldn't see who to thank so she thanked God. Somehow, she managed to reach the Greene Street door. Dozens of women had already beaten her to it, their faces fiery red, their dresses blackened and scorched.

"It's locked, locked."

Fiona shivered despite the heat and backed away. Workers not paralyzed with fear became a struggling stampede and charged toward the elevators. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the freight elevator door closing, a crush of women pinned inside and several leaping onto the elevator roof. Too late for her. Fiona's eyes blurred with tears.

A bin of cotton fabrics inches from her whooshed into flames and she mewled like a maimed kitten. Then the line of hanging blouse patterns began to burn. It erupted into an orange and red blaze. Unearthly utterances emanated through her lips and she understood the plaintive sound of terror.

The fire escape. I must reach the fire escape.

The crowd of panic-stricken women seemed to catch her thought at once and rushed as one wriggling, squirming mass to the fire escape window. Someone threw a chair through the glass. A dozen panicky women crawled out. Voices shouted.

“Not too many, it’s dangerous, it won’t hold.”

“It don’t go down ter the street.”

Fiona found herself suspended in fear and disbelief. Her lungs were about to implode from the thick, poisonous smoke. She dropped to the floor to catch a breath and snaked her way toward the fire escape ladder.

When she reached the wall, she rose, held a cloth over her mouth and nose and leaned out over the broken window. At that moment, Fiona heard a terrible groaning of metal on metal, the screeching of bolts coming undone. Before she could shout out, the fire escape, a mere flimsy ladder, was shearing away from the building. Plummeting nine stories to the basement skylight along with twenty or more workers clinging for their lives. She watched, aghast, as it bounced twice against the building, crushing limbs before it landed, dumping its cargo into the dark pit of the cellar or onto a spiked iron fence at the bottom of the shaft.

Fiona pulled back, deafened by the shrieks. She found herself pushed and prodded toward a large open window on the Greene Street side of the building. It looked out upon the New York sky. A beautiful sapphire sky, turning to charcoal as fingers of greasy, sooty smoke drifted out from behind her.

Hollers from the street below: “The ladders don’t reach. The nets don’t hold,” passed through her consciousness without taking hold. Her mind couldn’t accept the wretched plight before her. Women were hurtling themselves out the windows into the air, one by one, with a

grim acceptance that death by falling nine stories was somehow better than death by fire.

Fiona's throat and eyes burned gritty from smoke and ash. Her mind numbed to the bedlam.

I am trapped.

At that instant, a violent, piercing pain punched her in the back. She fell to her knees.

Her hand came away bloodied from the wound. *I . . . don't . . . understand.*

She turned from the window to face the devil himself. In the wavering air, Fiona could see the gun in his hand. The raw, crimson scar on his cheek stood out in relief on his pasty white skin. The scar she herself had wrought. At that moment it became clear. She had misjudged badly. She should have trusted Cormac, her love, her life. She should have revealed the letter to him sooner. Now it was too late.

Blood pooled beneath her and her legs wobbled.

The devil grinned as he approached. Without a word, he lifted her to her feet and maneuvered her to the window. The pain radiated to her arms and legs. Fiona's brain grew dull. She couldn't match his strength as he propelled her forward until she, like the others, faced the dimming azure sky.

He forced her feet upon the windowsill, his insistent, unforgiving hands guiding her. Her will faded. She was so terribly tired. In the distance Fiona spied a hawk sweeping in endless circles. She reached out to touch it, to sprout wings and take to the air. She dearly regretted that she would never see her tiny son soar like that bird.

Time had run out and she had only herself to blame.

Fiona leaned out of the window to grasp the hawk's red tail, the clouds, the sky, higher, farther, finally tearing the last earthly strings that bound her.

One Hundred Years Later

Chapter 1

March 21, 2011

3:30 p.m.

The body was still recognizable despite falling nine stories to the pavement. Female, early to mid-twenties, honey-colored hair, blue eyes glazed to eerie pale ice chips. Her arms and legs bent at astonishing angles. Blood leaked from her mouth and ears, but nowhere near the volume behind her head, the dark syrupy liquid painting the sidewalk with grisly tentacles.

Francis Aloysius Mead squatted as close to the dead girl as possible without disturbing the scene. The smell was always what got him first. Fresh death. Different from those in the morgue. Fresh death did not assault the senses in a numbing way like decay and putrefaction, but invaded the body viscerally, sharp and painful like inhaling salt water up your nose. He breathed through his mouth and studied the dead girl.

Worse than dealing with a corpse was the realization that a young life had been obliterated. He hated waste.

Frank rubbed his head, somewhere between buzz and bald, and looked up at the girl's killer--the ten-story Brown Building in the heart of Greenwich Village.

Helluva way to start his new assignment.

“Lieutenant?” A heavysset, pasty-faced patrol officer approached.

Frank stood, knees complaining, and looked up again at the building. A ninth story window was the only one open wide enough to fit a human being.

“Lieutenant?”

“I hear you.” Frank turned to the beat cop.

“Looks like she went out the ninth story window, from what witnesses--.”

“Yeah, no shit. Where are these witnesses?”

“Uh, in the lobby, of the building, that is.”

Frank looked at the officer’s name badge. Ivan Wynkosky.

“All right, Ivan, thanks.”

Wynkosky twisted his lips into a sneer, clearly unhappy with the dismissive treatment. He turned and marched off.

Great way to make friends. Frank shook his head, pissed at himself.

He cricked his stiff neck and strode through the main doors, leaving the medical examiner and crime team techs to their job. Inside, four uniforms and a dozen bystanders stood around, pacing, squirming on lobby benches, standing, fidgeting, sitting again.

A tall, knobby man loped toward Frank. Frank had met the sergeant for barely ten minutes the day before, but knew he’d be a hard nut to crack in the welcome department.

“Jefferies?”

“Lieutenant. Apparently the vic’s name was Stephanie Brandt. Twenty-three, reporter for the *Post*.”

“Reporter? What was she doing here?”

“Good question,” the sergeant said without hypothesizing.

Frank might like this guy after all.

“This building is part of the University, right?”

“Yup,” Will Jefferies said.

“What else do we know?”

“Brandt was waiting for a history class on the ninth floor to get over with so she could talk to the professor. When the class ended, everyone left, or so they thought. Coupla’ students down at the end of the hall heard a scream, ran back into the room, and noticed the window was open.”

“Wasn’t open during class?” Frank said.

“Uh uh. Too chilly. Nobody was in the room so they went to the window and looked out.” He shrugged. “Room has two other doors. In fact, the professor left through one of them.”

“Why would he leave if he was meeting with the reporter?”

“Says he just went to the men’s room before their appointment.”

“The witnesses definitely heard a scream?”

Jefferies nodded. “Don’t think suicides scream before they leap, do you?” The sergeant fixed Mead with a direct eye.

“No, Sergeant. In my experience, most jumpers scream because they’ve been pushed.”

“And you’ve had a lot of experience,” Jefferies said, that challenge between them surfacing like a shark fin in dark waters.

Frank pulled Jefferies aside and spoke quietly. “Look, Sergeant, I know you and the rest of the squad are not happy with this situation. I wouldn’t be either, matter of fact. An outsider moves into your territory and takes charge. After all, what the fuck does a D.C. cop know about

New York? The fact remains, I am the new Lieutenant and you *will* take orders from me whether you like it or not. Get over it.” He rested his hand on his hips and stared up at Jefferies. “I hope we don’t have to have this conversation again. Now, we’ve got a murder on our hands. Which one’s the professor?”

“Hyman Schueller, there.” Jefferies nodded to a gray-haired, gray-bearded man wearing a shabby corduroy jacket and jeans.

Frank turned away and walked over to the man in question.

“Mr. Schueller.” Frank held up his I-D and shield.

“Dr.”

Pause. “Dr. Schueller. What can you tell me about Miss Brandt?”

“Nothing. I didn’t even know her.” He licked his lips, pushed rimless glasses up the bridge of his nose. “She left me a message at my office that she wanted to interview me, me and other people who worked at the Brown Building. So I said sure. She came early, sat in on the end of the class, and then we were going to talk in my office down the hall.”

“You left for a few minutes and--?”

“And when I got back, well, the window, several students were looking down. Just terrible. Why would she do such a thing?”

“You mean take her own life?”

“Of course. Why? It doesn’t make sense.” Schueller shook his head and lowered himself to the bench.”

“It may not be suicide, doctor.”

The professor looked up, mouth dropped open. “Not, not suicide. Then what, someone pushed her? Oh my God.”

“Dr. Schueller, why did Miss Brandt want to interview you and others here? Something special about the Brown Building?”

“Well, she said she was working on a piece to commemorate the tragic events that took place here a hundred years ago. When it was the Asch Building.”

Frank scanned the lobby with its newly installed slate floor tiles, brass handrails framing the simulated marble staircase. He’d grown up in a neighborhood like this and knew a little about the architecture.

This building was early 1900’s, neo-Renaissance-style. Original lobby probably of all wood--floor, stairs, and banisters. Not particularly attractive but then it was just an industrial building, a place used by garment workers, he recalled. That struck a chord. He knew about these events somehow. It was a fire. Catastrophic fire. How did he know this?

“Horrific disaster,” Schueller went on. “Fire broke out on the top three floors, doors locked, people trapped. *Oy vey*, it gives me goose bumps still. Over a hundred people died of smoke asphyxiation, fire. . Oh my God. So many young girls, garment workers. . . jumped.” He wiped sweat off his brow. “They jumped to their deaths from the ninth story.”

And then Frank knew. It was the worst disaster in New York history before the World Trade Center. In an era of Tammany Hall politicians, union progressives and suffragettes. This area of the city was the garment industry and the Asch Building was once home to the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.